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Inequalities in British University League Tables: The Covid-19 Pandemic and Halo Effects

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Abstract

This essay explores the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the position of British universities in league tables. We argue that the pandemic has increased the inequalities between them. Through the analysis of the three core functions of universities – internationalization, research, and teaching, we predict that the gap between top-tier and second-tier universities will widen, mainly due to the former's halo effect.

Keywords: British universities, Covid-19, halo effect, league tables

In the Higher Education (HE) sector, league tables are perceived by many as a measure of quality. They shape university actions by directing institutional resources to valued research and the recruitment of higher tuition students (Voigt, 2020). In Britain, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced universities to cope with significant changes – hybrid teaching styles, shifts in research funding priorities and a potential loss of international students. The exogenous shock of the pandemic should have a knock-on effect on all league table standings. However, that is unlikely to occur. In this brief essay, we argue that the halo effect shields top-tier

universities, protecting them from fluctuations in league tables. As a result, we are likely to see the already existing gap between top-tier and non-top tier HE Institutions (HEIs) widen. The differing effects of the pandemic on universities' positions in league tables call into question the validity of ranking systems as a measure of quality and lead us to wonder if they are better characterized as a measure of reputation, legacy, and financial stability.

The halo effect, well-known in critiques of league tables (Clarke, 2002), can provide a useful frame to understand how the pandemic might influence league tables. The halo effect can take two forms. Firstly, it can be a hurdle faced by 'newer' institutions, who have to prove themselves against more established ones. For example, in their analysis of the 1995 National Research Council's study of programmes leading to a doctorate by research, Graham and Diamond (1997) illustrated how younger and smaller universities in the US had little chance against Ivy League universities to gain top league positions. This hurdle is a combination of internal forces, including institutional limitations such as financial capabilities, and external forces associated with ranking-related effects, such as the positive relationship between previously published rankings and future reputation surveys (Bastedo and Bowman, 2010). Secondly, the halo effect reflects the biases of those completing reputation surveys, which form indicators of quality in ranking systems such as *Times Higher Education (THE)* and *Quacquarelli Symonds (QS)*. For instance, Webster (1981) showed that academic 'experts' ranked Princeton's non-existing law school highly. The US National Research Council (2003) noted similar effects for programmes leading to a doctorate by research. As scholars generally lack the information necessary to evaluate the continuously changing programmes in their disciplines at other universities, their responses often positively elevate weaker courses at well-known institutions. This bias skewed ratings benefiting historically well-regarded universities. Therefore, the halo effect helps top-tier universities stay at the top regardless of changes in quality or performance (Usher and Savino, 2006). Both forms of the halo effect play a part in how the Covid-19 pandemic will affect universities' abilities to recover from the shock and their opportunities to achieve higher league table positions. We explore this by examining the likely impact of the pandemic on the three core functions of HEIs – internationalization, research, and teaching – across British universities.

In Britain, across commonly cited league tables, membership of the Russell Group (roughly equivalent to Ivy League universities) correlates strongly with top league table positions. According to the *THE*, *QS*, *Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)*, *Complete University Guide* and *Guardian University Guide* 2020 league tables, all but two (St Andrews and Lancaster) of the British institutions in the top quartile (Q1) of league tables are Russell Group universities. These institutions were all founded pre-1992, are well-established, research-intensive and offer a wide spectrum of subjects. The second quartile (Q2) consists mostly of pre-1992 but non-Russell Group universities and some post-1992 institutions, along with the three remaining Russell Group universities – Cardiff, Queen’s University Belfast and Newcastle. The characteristics of Q2 HEIs include a mixture of ages and research strengths; some are specialized while others are non-specialized.

Among the three core functions of HEIs, internationalization – most often associated with the proportion of international to national student numbers – has received the most attention. In preparation for the 2020/21 academic year, universities were particularly worried about their international student numbers, as international students’ fees and accommodation rentals are key income sources. Financial losses in the British HE sector during the pandemic, related to changes in international student enrolment, were predicted to range from £1.4-4.3 billion (Drayton & Waltmann, 2020). A key shortfall in income was predicted by the British Council to stem from 14,000 fewer new enrolments from East Asian countries, totaling over £450 million (British Council, 2020). While total enrolment numbers for the academic year 2020/21 are not yet available, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service’s (UCAS) undergraduate admission numbers indicate a different reality to the predictions: non-EU international numbers rose by 9% to a new record high of 44,300, with most of this increase concentrated in Q1 HEIs. This contrasts with the initial predictions from the Institute for Fiscal Studies which suggested Q1 HEIs would suffer proportionately more losses in total international student intakes compared to Q2 HEIs (Drayton & Waltmann, 2020). Instead, according to the UCAS undergraduate admission numbers, Russell Group universities experienced on average a 20% increase in non-EU international students, with a high of up to 67% at the University College London (UCL), while almost two-thirds of Q2 universities experienced a decline, with the University of Strathclyde being hit the worst with a drop of 45%.

While public attention has focused on the financial impact of lower international student numbers, this is unlikely to have a significant effect on ranking positions as international student ratios account for as little as 2.5-5% in the total score. As already indicated by the UCAS undergraduate admission numbers, Q1 universities' haloes are strong enough to attract international students even amid a global pandemic. In addition, Q1 universities benefit from being able to absorb students from Q2 institutions. Therefore, we predict that if there is a drop in international student numbers, Q1 HEIs are likely to lose proportionately fewer students compared to Q2 institutions.

Research quality, the second function of HEIs, receives the most weight in international rankings such as *THE*, *QS* and *ARWU*, contributing up to 60% of the overall score. Common indicators include reputation surveys, citations per faculty member, and research income. Similarly to the internationalization function, relative to Q2 institutions, Q1 universities suffer less and benefit more from the global pandemic in terms of research support. 88% of Russell Group universities have received national government funding or are partners in research projects on Covid-19. The largest funding amounts were received by the golden triangle – Oxford, Cambridge, and UCL – and two Scottish HEIs – Edinburgh and Glasgow – with amounts ranging from £3-10 million. While most of the attention and funding concentrates on Q1 HEIs, 54% of Q2 institutions also received funding, yet the highest amount was just over £1 million. This funding can be expected to enhance the league table positions of universities in Q1. Firstly, it improves indicators measuring research income and productivity. Secondly, it contributes to the haloes of Q1 HEIs. For example, Oxford and Cambridge have received considerable media attention as key research centers for a Covid-19 vaccine, potentially increasing scores in reputation surveys conducted by *QS* and *THE*. Similarly, the number of research papers published, and the number of citations as measured respectively in *ARWU* and in *THE* and *QS* will be driven by this funding. As the pandemic is a worldwide phenomenon, articles resulting from the Covid-19 related research are more likely to be highly cited. Hence, we expect Q1 institutions' lead with respect to research indicators in league tables to expand over those in Q2.

Finally, we anticipate similar changes in measures of teaching quality. Common indicators include reputation surveys, student-staff ratios, and expenditure per student/facility. Like the reputation surveys for research quality, those on teaching quality are biased towards Q1 HEIs

due to the halo effects. During the pandemic, student-staff ratios have experienced two waves of significant changes. Initially, British HEIs were concerned about low student enrolment and significant losses in fees. Therefore, Q1 and Q2 universities were under similar pressure to look at ways to reduce costs, most easily achieved through closing departments, cutting pay, and offering voluntary redundancies. Among the 20 British HEIs financially most at risk, only Nottingham is a Q1, Russell Group university. A further four are Q2 HEIs – Heriot-Watt, Dundee, Leicester, and Reading – and the remaining 15 are Q3s, Q4s or unranked institutions (Frontier Economics, as cited in Smith, 2020). Secondly, nationally run school exams (whose results determine university entry) were cancelled due to the pandemic. After a botched government attempt to statistically recalibrate exam results and significant pushback from pupils on the biased results, students were awarded mostly higher final grades, based on teacher estimates. The increased number of national students achieving their admission targets means that student numbers are now exceeding expectations. While the initial grim outlook forced some HEIs to look at reducing staff numbers, Q1s were probably able to hold off on voluntary redundancies for longer than Q2s. This results in lower student-staff ratios and strengthened league table leadership for Q1s.

In all three areas measured by ranking systems – internationalization, research, and teaching – Q1 universities are protected by their haloes and are benefiting from the ripple effects of the pandemic. While lower tier universities feel the adverse effects, haloes – projecting reputation, legacy, and financial sustainability – lead Q1 universities to increase their already disproportionate share of resources. Mirroring and building on Graham and Diamond’s (1997) findings, the pandemic exacerbates the hurdle faced by the largely younger and smaller Q2 HEIs making it even more difficult for them to catch up. During pre-pandemic times, league tables were already quite static at the top and movement between ranks was only common towards the lower half (Bastedo & Bowman 2010, Usher & Savino, 2006). We suggest that even a global pandemic may not be enough to shake up the pecking order of British universities.

Quality may be the ultimate aim for universities, but the pandemic and subsequent results make it clear that that is not what ranking systems are capturing. League tables are annual reminders of the prestige and continuing legacy of the aristocracy of universities, rather than a responsive and meaningful tool to assess educational quality.

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